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SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA: NO CONFIRMED H5N1 IN ISRAEL;
REGIONAL MEETING PLANNED FOR ISTANBUL; OPPORTUNITIES FOR
EARLY WARNING TRACKING OF MIGRATORY BIRDS

REFS: A) STATE 209622, B) TEL AVIV 05579, C) TEL AVIV 06170

1. (U) INTRO AND SUMMARY: This message is Post's response to Ref A questions regarding the GOI's efforts to prepare for avian and pandemic influenza, and its capability to respond to an AI epidemic. Questions are answered in the order provided in reftel. To date, there have been no/no confirmed cases of H5N1 in Israel, in birds or humans. Two American NGOs are sponsoring a regional preparedness meeting to be held in Istanbul in December. Local experts are seeking funding for early warning monitoring of birds passing through Israel on their way to more vulnerable locations in Africa. END INTRO AND SUMMARY.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

2. (U) Answers

A) PREPAREDNESS/COMMUNICATION

-- ESTH Officer met with the Director of the Israel Center for Disease Control (ICDC) Dr. Manfred Green, Advisor to the Head of Public Services and National AI Preparedness Coordinator Shmuel Reznikovich, and their colleagues November 27 to discuss the GOI's national preparedness plan to deal with a possible outbreak of avian and pandemic influenza. The Ministry of Health (MOH) distributed a detailed working paper (89 pages) on avian flu preparedness October 10 that describes health care system and other measures that will be taken if an outbreak of avian and pandemic influenza occurs. The ICDC Director noted that the national preparedness plan closely follows WHO guidelines and recommendations on responding to and containing avian and pandemic influenza.

-- The GOI has set up a national task force, with representatives from the MOH and Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) Veterinary Services. The team guides the development of policy, recommends actions when needed, and provides training in the field to deal with a potential outbreak.

-- The national preparedness plan is easily accessible to the general public and health care professionals through the MOH Internet website in Hebrew at www.health.gov.il. The plan will be available on the MOH website in English in December.

-- MOH will participate in a regional Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS) conference on influenza preparedness in Istanbul December 11 - 14. The conference is sponsored by Search for Common Ground and the NTI Global Health and Security Initiative and will include public health and veterinary specialists from Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine. The organizers expect observers from Iraq, and there may be participants from Turkey and Cyprus, as well as WHO and other international experts. Health and veterinary services representatives from Turkey and Cyprus have also been invited to attend. The goal of the conference is to coordinate regional efforts in disease surveillance and control measures and to find ways to assist each other in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak. The organizers have welcomed participation from the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul, and Embassy has conveyed that invitation to the Consul General.

-- The GOI will be forthcoming in reporting any AI cases, both to the WHO and to its own citizens. In a recent case in which a man working in a nature preserve experienced flu-like symptoms, MOH moved quickly to test the man's blood in country and sent blood samples overseas for confirmation testing as well. MOH was open with press and public about steps being taken in that case. MOH officials have stated that they will notify WHO and the public immediately of any confirmed cases of H5N1. So far there have not/not been any confirmed cases of H5N1 in birds or humans in Israel.

-- The GOI is continuing to give avian and pandemic flu

preparedness high priority. The "go-to" person for USG officials to engage on this issue is MOH Director General Professor Avi Yisraeli at the Ministry of Health.

-- Avian and pandemic influenza has been added to Israel's list of reportable diseases.

-- GOI health officials have been in regular contact with the WHO, and are following WHO planning and response guidelines. The MOH is also in contact with the Ministry of Agriculture regarding surveillance and monitoring of poultry and wild birds for evidence of the disease. Health officials are also in contact with their counterparts in the Palestinian Authority and Egypt to coordinate disease surveillance efforts, as well as with colleagues at the U.S. CDC, and national public health services in Canada and the UK. GOI veterinary officials are working closely with their Palestinian and Jordanian counterparts.

-- Israeli hospitals and HMOs currently administer annual flu shots. Israel does produce influenza vaccines, but does not produce Tamiflu. It might be able to contribute to Tamiflu production under a WHO-declared emergency. Vaccines for poultry are imported from the Netherlands. Health officials were not aware of local research towards a H5N1 vaccine, but Israel does have related research capabilities.

-- Because AI features prominently in the local and international press and government ministries have been proactive in informing the Israeli public, the general population is aware of the issue. However, health officials expressed concern that the public may disregard or downplay the threat of AI because of the previous public health scares (Swine flu and SARS) that did not become pandemics. There is also some risk that less informed third-country nationals (TCNs), some of whom work at Israeli poultry farms, might not be fully aware of the threat.

B) SURVEILLANCE/DETECTION

-- The MOA Veterinary Service has its own laboratories to test samples from farms, markets, and migratory birds. The MOA laboratories also serve as regional testing facilities for suspected cases from Gaza and the West Bank, as well as from Jordan. Protective gear and doses of Tamiflu have been made-ready for poultry workers who may come into contact with chickens infected with the disease. The GOI has long-standing relationships with the USDA and APHIS.

-- MOA recently conducted an emergency action drill to train poultry workers and Veterinary Service specialists. A U.S. veterinary health specialist attended that exercise.

-- A critical international gap that Israel could help address is the need for expanded monitoring and surveillance to screen migratory birds for the H5N1 virus as part of an early warning system. Because Israel is a major fly-over region for migratory birds between Russia and Europe and Africa, a more aggressive screening effort here could identify risks for more vulnerable areas in Africa. Two sets of local experts have submitted related proposals to GOI ministries, but it is unclear at this point whether they will be funded.

C) RESPONSE/CONTAINMENT

-- Israel has already purchased NIS 44 million (just under USD 10 million) worth of Tamiflu. MOH has requested additional funding of 150 million NIS to purchase additional Tamiflu. MOH officials anticipate that the additional supplies will be available by March. MOA officials have many years of experience controlling and containing diseases that may affect poultry and livestock.

-- An additional 10 million NIS has been allocated for the purchase of protective gear. The gear will be stockpiled in MOH warehouses. A plan detailing logistics of distribution is in place.

-- Based on the national preparedness plan, surveillance and monitoring of suspected cases of avian flu, emergency action drills and planning in the agricultural sector, and efforts made to stockpile vaccines and protective gear, the GOI rapid response capacity appears to be good. The MOA Veterinary Service already closely monitors poultry producers and has stated that they would quickly cull infected poultry stocks and/or birds. Although specific amounts have not been decided, the GOI plans to compensate poultry producers if it should be necessary to cull their stock. In the case of an outbreak of avian flu, the MOA would handle the situation by using guidelines that it has in place for handling other diseases that affect poultry and birds; quarantining of poultry in the affected areas would be put into effect and the sale of poultry products would be restricted.

-- Post believes that the GOI is willing to impose

quarantine and social distancing measures. Law enforcement and military personnel would enforce any quarantine, based on the severity of the outbreak of the disease.

JONES